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**CONTINGENCIES ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA:
CONFRONTATION OR PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE?**

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The Korean peninsula is a highly inflammable region that a spark could ignite at any moment. North Korean belligerence may increase in the 1980s, depending on internal problems in the two Koreas and the changing strategic environment in Asia. At some point, the Soviet Union may possibly encourage offensive actions by North Korea to further its own interests.

The "worst-case" contingency would be high-intensity military conflict on the peninsula. One course of action open to Pyongyang is an all-out surprise attack to secure or destroy the Seoul area, with the option of seeking negotiations if the chances of liberating the rest of the South appear unfavorable.

An even more likely option for Pyongyang involves modified guerrilla warfare, with the simultaneous infiltration of large commando units into major cities in the South. If the South Korean command structure became paralyzed, Pyongyang could then initiate a major military offensive.

A Korean conflict would pose a grave threat to U.S. interests in Asia and to the security of Japan. U.S. military involvement in the conflict could jeopardize its relations with China and increase the risk of direct military confrontation with the Soviet Union. In addition, the Soviets could choose this moment to exacerbate crises elsewhere.

U.S. interests lie in maintaining stability on the Korean peninsula, for which a strong U.S. military presence in Asia and continued close U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK) cooperation are vitally important.

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KOREA AND THE MAJOR POWERS IN ASIA

The Korean peninsula is the strategic fulcrum of East Asia, where the interests of four major powers -- the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and Japan -- converge. In the twentieth century, two major Asian wars, the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 and the Korean War in 1950, embroiled East and West in military conflicts concerning Korea. The U.S.-ROK mutual defense treaty of 1954 and the defense treaty of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) and the DPRK-USSR treaty in 1961 demonstrate the principal powers' current strategic interests in Korea.

The United States

U.S. policy toward Korea focuses on maintaining a stable strategic and political situation, stressing the prevention of armed conflict between the two Koreas and the avoidance of hegemony by any major power on the peninsula. Conflict in Korea would pose a potentially grave threat to the security of Japan, to regional stability, and to U.S. interests. The presence of U.S. combat forces in South Korea is an important means of preserving stability on the Korean peninsula.

In the wake of rapid changes in the Asian strategic environment following Sino-American rapprochement in the early 1970s, the United States has not always followed a consistent policy in dealing with South Korea. Nevertheless, the fundamental U.S. goal has remained intact. The Reagan administration stresses the continuing importance of close U.S.-ROK cooperation for regional stability throughout the 1980s.

Japan

Japan shares a common interest with the United States in preserving stability and reducing tension on the Korean peninsula to promote its security and economic interests. Because of its constitutional restrictions and the absence of defense arrangements with either of the two Koreas, however, Japan heavily depends upon the United States for security in Korea. The Japanese leadership is reluctant to see the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea.

The Soviet Union

Soviet policy toward the Korean peninsula is governed more by concern about Sino-Soviet conflict and rivalry with the United States and Japan than by its bilateral relationship with North Korea. Despite its recent strategic-military offensive in Asia, the Soviet Union has provided only limited logistic and military support to North Korea since the mid-1970s, a posture that, in effect, is conducive to stability on the Korean peninsula. The Moscow leadership may have concluded that Kim Il-sung would not be a reliable client due to his opportunistic stance in the Sino-Soviet dispute.

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Strategic considerations may be more important. Conflict in Korea fostered by Soviet military and economic support would accelerate pressures for Japanese remilitarization, cause anti-Soviet collaboration among the United States, Japan, and China, and exacerbate Sino-Soviet relations.

Nevertheless, at some point, Moscow may encourage and support a Pyongyang hard-line policy toward the South in the hope that a major military confrontation in Korea would split the Sino-American detente. Furthermore, if strategic circumstances seem favorable, as was the case in Vietnam in the 1970s, the Soviets may attempt to create one large Korea dominated by pro-Soviet Communists to reinforce dramatically their position in the Western Pacific.

China

China appears satisfied with the status quo and stability on the Korean peninsula. North Korea serves as an important buffer between the PRC and Western powers, and U.S. forces in South Korea help to counter Soviet expansionism. Military confrontation in Korea would place China in the strategic dilemma of either supporting the DPRK and jeopardizing U.S.-PRC relations or abandoning North Korea totally to Soviet influence. Peking, therefore, has consistently discouraged Pyongyang's belligerence. In recent years the Chinese have gradually increased their military and economic aid to North Korea including A-5 aircraft and oil supplies, and the relationship between the two countries has improved significantly. The Chinese efforts are aimed at preventing total North Korean dependence upon the Soviet Union and at countering Soviet encirclement of the PRC. Due to limited Chinese industrial and military capabilities, this support has not significantly affected the security balance on the Korean peninsula.

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CONFLICTING POLICIES OF THE TWO KOREAS

Under the influence of the major powers in Asia, South and North Korea each pursue active domestic and foreign policies. Since 1972, the two Koreas have been attempting to work for the reduction of tensions and ultimate reunification without outside interference. Their efforts at dialogue, however, have failed as a result of conflicting policies over the unification issue.

South Korea

The South Korean policy is based upon a "step-by-step" approach toward gradual integration by promoting cultural and economic exchanges during the initial stage and political negotiation at later stages. The position outlined by the South emphasizes greater security and the guarantee of stability as preconditions in the unification process. This concept is reflected in Seoul's military-strategic policy toward the North. South Korea's posture basically is defensive and reactive, stressing deterrence -- prevention of any armed conflict on the Korean peninsula. In effect, Seoul hopes for the recognition of the "two Koreas."

North Korea

Pyongyang, on the other hand, demands dramatic steps aimed at achieving immediate unification. The North Koreans declare that the prerequisites for unification include the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea, the scrapping of South and North Korean defense treaties with third countries, and the replacement of the armistice treaty of 1953 with a peace treaty. From Pyongyang's point of view, the U.S. military presence in Korea presents the main obstacle to unification and the primary threat to its security. As a result, since the mid-1970s, North Korea has sought bilateral talks with Washington, without South Korean participation, to negotiate its demands. The United States has rejected this offer. Instead, Washington has proposed the so-called "cross-recognition formula" -- recognition of the ROK by the USSR and the PRC in return for U.S. recognition of the DPRK -- which Pyongyang categorically rejects.

In South Korea's view, Pyongyang's approach is aimed at weakening the South by loosening its ties with the United States so that the North can unify the peninsula on its own terms. Indeed, over the past decades, North Korea's militant posture has changed little. As Pyongyang adopted a peace offensive toward the South in the early 1970s, it also launched a massive defense buildup. The North has laboriously dug a number of tunnels under the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), apparently to facilitate invasion. In addition, infiltrators have been constantly dispatched to the South.

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As a result of the irreconcilable policy positions and strategic goals of the two Koreas, neither peaceful reunification nor substantial reduction of their hostility toward one another appears likely in the foreseeable future. The peninsula is likely to remain a highly inflammable region where two combat-ready, powerful armies confront each other. It is a tinderbox into which a spark could fall at any time.

THE KOREAN BALANCE

Military

At present, North Korea possesses a substantial advantage over the South in overall quantity of military equipment as a result of its intensive defense buildup during the past decade. It now allocates some 15 to 20 percent, perhaps more, of its GNP to military spending. Its 790 thousand-man armed forces (out of a population of 19 million) are highly disciplined. The stockpile of North Korean military equipment in major categories -- armor, artillery, ships, and aircraft -- is estimated to be more than twice that of the South. The North holds a clear military advantage, with offensive capabilities fashioned precisely to the battlefield's tactical contours.

Pressured by these initiatives in the North, South Korea has been expanding its military modernization program since the late 1970s, effecting substantial increases in its military budget (currently 6 percent of the GNP). Its 600 thousand-man armed forces (out of a population of 40 million) are well-trained. The South retains a qualitative advantage in military equipment, including aircraft and ground weapons. These are not sufficient to offset its quantitative disadvantages, however. The military imbalance between the two Koreas seems likely to continue throughout the 1980s.

Economic

South Korea, however, enjoys far more advanced economic and industrial capabilities than the North. In 1981 the South Korean GNP (U.S. \$63 billion) was more than four times that of the North (U.S. \$14 billion), and the total volume of the South's foreign trade was more than ten times that of the North. South Korean technology is far superior to that of the North in almost every field.

Both Koreas are suffering from economic difficulties in the wake of worldwide economic recession. High inflation, worldwide oil shocks, and uncertain supplies of other key raw materials all adversely affect South Korean economic growth and stability. Pyongyang's economic problems appear to be even more serious as a result of heavy defense expenditures, increasing foreign debts (approximately U.S. \$3.5 billion), and lagging technology.

Soviet and Chinese aid is not sufficient to enable North Korea to match South Korean economic and industrial advances. Under such circumstances, the question is "how long, and to what extent, can Pyongyang sustain the level of massive military spending that enable it to retain its advantage over the South?" It will remain one of the most important issues in the 1980s -- as will the following question: "What might the North do if it sees its window of opportunity closing?"

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POLITICAL INSTABILITY

Another important determinant for security in Korea is the matter of political stability. An outbreak of serious internal unrest in the South would make it more tempting for Pyongyang to launch a surprise attack. In addition, an intensification of the power struggle in Pyongyang could accelerate Northern belligerence in an attempt to divert attention from internal problems, although such a struggle may divert aggressive actions.

North Korea

In the North, the Pyongyang leadership is now deeply involved in a power struggle over the issue of Kim Il-sung's political succession. At present, Kim is still firmly in command, but inexorably nearing the end of a long career because of his age and deteriorating health. In recent years, Kim has been making efforts to assure the succession of his 40-year old son, Jong-il, in an attempt to continue his major domestic and foreign policies and to prevent the downgrading of his reputation after his death. Since the Sixth Korean Workers' Party (KWP) Congress in 1980, Kim Jong-il has appeared as heir apparent: only the two Kims hold positions within the three key organs of the Central Committee -- the Standing Committee of the Politburo, the Secretariat, and the Military Committee. In addition, the North Korean regime already has launched a major campaign aimed at creating a "cult" for Kim Jong-il.

Kim Jong-il's problem is that, in addition to insufficient political experience, he is not fully supported by the senior military and party apparatus. In its attempt to create a communist dynasty, therefore, the North Korean leadership may become deeply involved in factional struggles. The political transition will be smoother if the elder Kim can remain in power until his son firmly consolidates his position by placing his supporters in key military and party posts, as the older generation fades away. But if Kim Il-sung's demise comes earlier, an intensification of the power struggle in North Korea becomes almost inevitable.

South Korea

South Korea also is likely to undergo complicated political developments in the 1980s. With the army's help, President Chun Doo Hwan has been quite successful in maintaining internal stability and consolidating his power. All essential political and strategic-security posts are now filled by Chun's loyal military associates. By sponsoring a new constitution notable for limiting the president to a single seven-year term, and by adopting various internal reforms, Chun has received moderately favorable popular support. In addition, the U.S. endorsement of Chun's government, following the Chun-Reagan meeting in Washington in 1981, helped to create a climate of political stability in South Korea. The recent visits of U.S. leaders to

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Seoul -- Vice President George Bush, Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger, and Secretary of State George Shultz -- served to confirm the importance of Korea to Washington and, in general U.S. approval of the course Chun Doo Hwan is taking.

Yet the potential for internal instability remains an important and threatening element in Seoul. A large opposition force has developed as a result of strict policies that were adopted as the current leadership consolidated its power; for instance, the imprisonment of political dissidents, the exclusion of dangerous political rivals from the political process, and the suppression of the Kwangju riots. Periodic protests by politicians against Chun's policies and the perennial uneasiness on university campuses reveal the undercurrents of potential unrest. In addition, a power struggle seems to have developed among Chun's political supporters -- his former colleagues from the Korean Military Academy, army leaders, and civilian government officials -- over issues relating to domestic and foreign policies.

Internal political stability in South Korea will depend on the success and duration of President Chun Doo Hwan and his policies. The army continues to be the backbone of the political system, and any decline in army support would immediately threaten the current leadership. Chun's ability to maintain domestic economic stability and fulfill the original political goals set forth since 1980 -- creation of a democratic welfare society, elimination of corruption and irregularities, growing freedom, and a peaceful transition after his seven years as president -- will be key issues. Beginning in the mid-1980s, issues involving the political succession will grow in importance. Will President Chun step down in 1988 as he promised, or will he extend his presidency? What kind of institutional arrangements will be created to make a peaceful transfer of power possible and to maintain internal stability if he decides to retire? Who will succeed him? The answers to these questions will greatly affect the degree of domestic political stability.

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CONTINGENCIES: Confrontation or Peaceful Coexistence?

The Korean peninsula theoretically remains in a state of war under the armistice agreement signed in 1953. The two Koreas retain large armed forces across the DMZ, and tensions and hostility between the two Koreas are explosive. The possibility of a South Korean attack on the North appears unlikely, however. Both South Korea and the United States pursue essentially status-quo policies and desire stability on the peninsula. In addition, U.S. operational supervision of the ROK armed forces would effectively restrain the Seoul leadership from any military initiative on its own.

North Korea may resume its effort to unite the peninsula by force, however, if Kim Il-sung or his successor were convinced that the North had a reasonably good chance of victory. The possibility of a North Korean attack on the South would be sharply increased if one or more of the following situations should develop:

- o a weakening of the U.S. commitment to the defense of South Korea;
- o a gradual U.S. withdrawal from its Asian security commitments, as it places increasing reliance upon Japan and other regional actors;
- o the eruption of major conflict in other parts of the world;
- o an escalation of internal unrest in South Korea;
- o an increase in Soviet military and logistic support to North Korea; or
- o an intensification of the internal power struggle in the North.

The Question of Timing

For the next several years, Pyongyang will be caught in a complex dilemma. First, Kim Il-sung has to settle the issue of the leadership transition in the face of sustained internal resistance to his efforts to assure the succession of his son, Jong-Il. Second, as a result of growing economic problems, it will be increasingly difficult for Pyongyang to maintain its current military advantage over the South; the fact that the gap between the two Koreas' economic and industrial capabilities is widening in South Korea's favor means that North Korean military superiority is a wasting asset. Third, Seoul is expected to benefit greatly from hosting the 1988 Olympic games, primarily in the economic, diplomatic, and cultural arenas, through improved contacts with non-hostile socialist and nonaligned nations. Faced with these prospects, North Korea has an incentive to initiate war with the South while it still retains an edge in military capabilities.

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The North Koreans have always placed great emphasis on their concept of the favorable time, the so-called "decisive moment." This may occur in the 1980s. Continued unfavorable international economic trends could cause a sharp deterioration in the South Korean domestic economy, particularly high inflation and a decline in the living standard, which would in turn adversely affect internal stability.

At the same time, it is possible that Seoul could be suffering from serious political tensions. In view of the 1988 Seoul Olympic games and the military threat from the North, the South Korean leadership may attempt to extend Chun's term for a few years in order to ensure political stability and security beyond 1988. There is also a significant possibility that Chun will try to make some of his reliable supporters the leaders of the country to secure his policies. Either way, South Korean political leaders are likely to step up efforts to exert their political influence behind the scenes as the designated time for President Chun's retirement approaches. These developments will not only intensify the power struggle among potential leaders in general and Chun's followers in particular, but could also arouse strong popular resistance, possibly leading to internal disturbances. The North Koreans could attempt to exploit such a situation.

An All-Out Attack

The worst case contingency involves the eruption of high-intensity conflict in Korea as a result of a North Korean attack. Broadly speaking, there are two possible options open to the North if it decides to take military action against the South. The first option would be an all-out, surprise attack with numerically superior ground and air capabilities aimed at securing or destroying the Seoul area. Pyongyang would then have the option of seeking negotiations with the United States if the chances of liberating the rest of South Korea appeared to be unfavorable. Given the fact that Seoul is so close -- only 40 kilometers away from the DMZ -- a blitzkrieg appears to be a tempting prospect. Such an attack is most likely to occur if the United States withdraws its ground forces from South Korea as part of its global strategic policy, or if major crises in other parts of the world seriously constrain the U.S. military capability to support the South. In the event of a major East-West crisis in Western Europe and/or the Persian Gulf region, substantial U.S. resources in the Western Pacific may be transferred to those regions, depleting the strategic reserve previously designed to reinforce South Korean defenses in case of a North Korean attack. On the other hand, if stability prevails elsewhere and the U.S. commitment to South Korean defense remains intact, the blitzkrieg contingency is less likely; the combined U.S.-ROK forces could roll back a Northern offensive.

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Modified Guerrilla War

The second broad option open to Pyongyang would involve a modified type of guerrilla warfare. Pyongyang retains a large commando force of approximately 100 thousand troops, the Special 8th Corps, and it has continued to improve capabilities, particularly since 1980, to insert them in the South, relying on light transport aircraft (AN2s), attack submarines, attack missile boats, and amphibious craft. With these well-disciplined commando units, North Korea could simultaneously dispatch large-scale armed infiltrators to major cities in the South to create internal chaos by assassinating key political and military leaders and destroying major government and industrial installations. Subsequently, if the South Korean command structure were paralyzed, the four North Korean army corps along the DMZ could immediately attack the South. Such circumstances would make it very difficult for the ROK and U.S. forces to offer effective resistance. This approach seems quite possible if the internal situation in the South becomes sharply aggravated as a result of political, social, and economic problems.

Peaceful Coexistence

The "best case" contingency would involve a drastic change in North Korea's militant posture toward the South. In view of its serious domestic economic problems, Pyongyang may reach the point that it can no longer pursue the sustained defense buildup necessary to maintain a clear advantage over the South in military capability. In addition, as the gap in economic and industrial capability between the two Koreas continues to widen, the Soviet Union and China may be reluctant to provide substantial assistance. Under such circumstances, the North Korean leadership may decide to postpone forceful unification for the time being so that it can concentrate its resources upon an economic and technological buildup, rather than on defense-oriented heavy industry. In this case, Pyongyang might accept the political status quo and peaceful coexistence with the South.

Although this is the most desirable course of events, it is unlikely to occur under the current militant regime of Kim Il-sung or his potential successor Kim Jong-il. Yet, this possibility must not be totally excluded, especially if the power struggle in the North leads to the victory of more moderate party bureaucrats over the more militant army leaders.

Increased North Korean Harassment

Another possible contingency involves a sharp increase of tensions on the Korean peninsula in the absence of a major military confrontation. North Korea may conclude that the chances for military victory are dim, but to take no action would not be conducive to its interests. In such a case, while avoiding an open offensive, Pyongyang could accelerate infiltration and cross-border activities by employing commando forces to frustrate political and economic stability in the South. This possibility continues to exist throughout this decade

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CONSEQUENCES

Open North Korean aggression would provoke a strong South Korean reaction, which could lead to major military confrontation on the Korean peninsula. Conflict in Korea would lead to significant dilemmas for four principal powers in Asia -- the United States, Japan, China, and the Soviet Union.

The United States is bound by the U.S.-ROK mutual defense treaty of 1954 to come to South Korea's defense. However, such action could jeopardize the U.S. relationship with the PRC as well as run the risk of direct U.S.-Soviet military confrontation.

Japan is unlikely to get involved directly in the Korean conflict. The Japanese, however, would be seriously concerned if that conflict touched off regional or global war with the superpowers' participation. The Soviet Union and its proxies may adopt a concerted coercive diplomacy toward Japan to prevent it from supplying logistic support to the United States and South Korea. In particular, U.S. use of military bases in Japan could be an important issue. Nevertheless, Japan cannot tolerate a Communist victory in the conflict.

China would be also caught in a dilemma. Under the Sino-North Korean defense treaty of 1961, Peking has an obligation to provide Pyongyang with military and economic support. But Chinese support for North Korea could inevitably threaten Peking's relations with the United States. Peking would have three possible options in the event of conflict: taking a neutral position with no action, putting external pressure upon Pyongyang to restrict its military action, or supporting North Korea. The most likely course for China is to provide North Korea with limited logistic and military support, while seeking to prevent aggravation of its relations with the United States.

The degree of Soviet involvement will determine the nature of the conflict. Moscow, as in the early 1950s, might value a large-scale conflict in Korea as a means of distracting the United States, exacerbating Sino-U.S. relations, and reinforcing its presence in the region. Yet, the Soviet leaders would be concerned about the possibility that such a situation could embroil the Soviet Union directly in the conflict and create pressure for Japanese remilitarization. Whatever the level of hostilities, the Soviet Union will attempt to obtain maximum strategic benefit from the Korean situation.

U.S. INTERESTS AND POLICY OPTIONS

In general, U.S. interests lie in maintaining a stable strategic and political environment within the context of the status quo on the Korean peninsula. The existence of a free South Korea is vital for the maintenance of a balance of power in the Western Pacific. Stability in Korea enhances the security of Japan. At the same time, close U.S.-South Korean cooperation increases U.S. economic and strategic power in Asia.

To protect these interests, the United States should continue its firm military commitment to South Korea; promote internal stability in the South by maintaining close U.S.-ROK economic and political cooperation; work to rectify the South-North Korean military imbalance by helping improve overall South Korean conventional warfare capabilities; promote South-North Korean dialogue for the purpose of reducing tensions, with the ultimate goal of achieving national reunification through political accommodation; and promote international arrangements with the Soviet Union and China, such as "cross-recognition" or "five-way talks."

In the event of an eruption of serious internal turmoil in South Korea, the United States should take steps to prevent North Korea from exploiting such a situation. Possible U.S. actions include a clear warning to North Korea and its allies concerning a strong U.S.-ROK response in case of provocations and the strengthening of regional forces in and around South Korea. At the same time, Washington should initiate efforts to promote the fastest possible restoration of political and economic stability in South Korea. Indeed, to limit the possibilities of internal upheaval, the United States should encourage South Korea to accept wider political participation and the evolution of democratic institutions.

A North Korean invasion would provoke an immediate and strong retaliation by the ROK and the United States. Yet, there would be certain constraints on U.S. actions. There is a possibility that full-scale U.S. involvement could be delayed because it has to adhere to "constitutional processes" in accordance with Article 3 of the 1954 U.S.-ROK mutual defense treaty. Moreover, in the event of simultaneous crises in other parts of the world, particularly in Europe or the Middle East, U.S. military capabilities to support South Korea could be significantly but unpredictably limited.

If a North Korean attack occurs, the United States should initiate various important steps. In addition to increasing military and logistic support to South Korea, particularly air and naval capabilities, it would be in the U.S. interest to strengthen the U.S. position in the Western Pacific to deter Soviet or Chinese participation in the conflict. At the same time, it would also be important for the United States to cooperate closely with its allies in Europe and Japan, because if

U.S. forces were to become deeply involved in a Korean conflict, the Soviets or their proxies might choose this moment to exacerbate crises elsewhere.

In addition, the United States should seek to restrain North Korean military operations. North Korean logistical routes can be interrupted by blockading major Northern ports; diplomatic pressure should be placed upon the Soviet Union and the PRC to end military support to the DPRK; and collective international economic and political sanctions against Pyongyang should be pursued through multilateral organizations, particularly the United Nations.